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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that some proponents of multicultural education (ME) appear to teach intolerance of certain kinds of speech. The essay argues, in support, the down-playing of tolerance in ME as cultural respect, accommodation, and harmony are stronger candidates as virtues. The essay goes on to point out that ME does not teach cultural neutrality. In fact, ME must teach students to be intolerant of any cultural group that actively seeks to dominate all of society. These presumed limits on tolerance have led advocates to prevent and interfere with hate speech and other forms of cultural disrespect. Three difficulties with this approach, the essay asserts, are that: (1) it is difficult to discern the intentions of a speaker which is very important in the judgment of offensive speech; (2) despite the innocent intention of a speaker, listeners might be offended and enhanced sensitivity to cultural disrespect might antagonize a situation that is already agitated; (3) some cultural groups may have some language of cultural disrespect as one of its features and thus teaching ME may involve teaching disrespect of some cultural groups in society. The essay concludes by stating that tolerance may be ascribed only to moral beings, that is, voluntary agents engaged in interpersonal action. It then recommends that if the proponents of ME reflected on the conceptual connection between tolerance and moral agency, they ultimately would see that students must learn to tolerate all cultural features compatible with moral agency and learn not to tolerate any that are incompatible with moral agency. (Contains 11 references.) (JB)

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TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE IN MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

by

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TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE IN MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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Advocates of Multicultural Education (ME) have had a mixed attitude towards the teaching of tolerance. On the one hand, they have shown little or no special interest in teaching tolerance even though they have regarded it as a trait of the members of a multicultural society.[1] On the other hand, some proponents of ME occasionally have suggested that it might be desirable to teach students to be intolerant of certain things, mainly, linguistic signs of cultural disrespect. These are those advocates who have acted to ban "hate speech" and "politically incorrect speech." I do not know that they actually want students to learn to be intolerant of these and other linguistic forms of cultural disrespect, but because of their actions I suppose that they do.

My attitude towards that of ME's advocates here is also differential. On the one hand, I believe they have a good reason for deemphasizing the teaching of tolerance. On the other hand, I do not believe they can have sufficiently good reasons for wanting students to learn to be intolerant of the language of cultural disrespect.

The reason why tolerance should be played down as a quality for students to learn pertains ultimately to the features of the

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[1]In their thorough and scholarly analysis of the literature on Mulitucultural Education, Sleeter and Grant do not even mention tolerance as a topic addressed by that literature (Sleeter and Grant, 1987). Also, in her conception of a multicultural curriculum for the future, Ernst says nothing about tolerance (Ernst, 1993).

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members of a multicultural society. According to Gollnick and Chinn (1986), Ernst (1993), and others, the members of such a society belong to different cultures; they understand and respect each other's cultures; they make accommodations to each other's cultures; they live in harmony with each other; they favor social justice and equal opportunity for all people. To be sure, tolerance also is a feature of a member of a multicultural society. While understanding a culture does not conceptually entail toleration of it, respecting, accommodating, or living harmoniously with a culture does involve toleration of it. Tolerance, nevertheless, is not especially important as a trait of the members of a multicultural society. Being nothing more than a condition of enduring something without resistance or of not attempting to prevent or disrupt something, tolerance may be a characteristic of people who neither respect, accomodate, nor live harmoniously with each other as members of diverse cultural groups.

When the British adopted, in 1688, religious tolerance as a constitutional principle (Mendenhall, Henning, Foord, 1948), they thereby neither necessarily respected, accommodated, nor harmoniously lived with those of themselves who were Roman Catholics or dissenting Protestants. In contemporary America, WASPS and African Americans occasionally neither respect, accommodate, nor live harmoniously with each other even though they usually tolerate one another. In short, tolerance is too general a quality to be especially important for multicultural society. The indifferent connection of tolerance with cultural pluralism has

led one writer to describe the principle as "bland" (Pratte, 1977, p. 155).

Of course, ME has to include tolerance as a disposition for students to learn; it simply cannot prepare them to be members of a multicultural society unless it teaches them to be culturally tolerant. At the same time, ME need not place much weight upon this disposition; it arguably should not regard tolerance even as a virtue of the multicultural citizen. Cultural respect, accommodation, and harmony are far stronger candidates as virtues. ME can content itself with teaching tolerance, along with understanding, as a logically prior condition of respect, accommodation, and harmony. This does not mean that ME must teach students to be tolerant separately from its teaching them to be respectful, accommodating, and harmonious. Yet, when ME finds that students cannot learn the virtues of multicultural citizenship because the students are culturally intolerant, then it might do well to give the students of concern separate instruction in tolerance.

That ME logically wants students to learn to be culturally tolerant certainly does not imply that it wants them to learn to be culturally neutral. In truth, multicultural society rejects cultural neutrality because such neutrality runs counter to the virtues of multicultural citizenship. Cultural neutrality means that one takes no position on any culture including one's own

(McClellan, 1968).[2] A person neither respects nor disrespects any cultural group, neither accommodates nor discommodes any, prefers living neither harmoniously nor discordantly with any. Yet, that ME embraces tolerance while rejecting neutrality does not entail that it has to advocate the tolerance of each and every cultural group or all features of each and every cultural group. ME arguably has to teach students to be intolerant of any cultural group that actively seeks to dominate all of society.

It is because of ME's presumed limits on tolerance that at least some of its advocates have sought to prevent and interfere with hate speech, politically incorrect speech, and other linguistic modes of cultural disrespect. On an initial glance, I find that these advocates have a plausible case despite snipings by journalists, e.g., John Leo (Leo, 1993). The thrust of the case is that cultural disrespect is twice vicious. Plainly, cultural disrespect is a vice for ME in that it is the antithesis of cultural respect, a virtue in multicultural society. But it also is vicious in that it promotes a vice besides itself. Cultural disrespect tends to be offensive to individual members of its targeted cultures; being offensive, it also tends to be antagonizing, thereby encouraging cultural discord, another vice for ME. Even though I agree with each of these points, I believe,

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[2]I am not sure that Budziszewski is correct in holding that tolerance excludes neutrality (Budziszewski, 1992, 133-38). May not the tolerant person occasionally find it reasonable to be neutral toward some things? That is, may not not taking a stand be a reasonable way of not trying to prevent or interfere with something?

nevertheless, that the argument faces serious difficulties.

The first difficulty pertains to what philosophers once called "pragmatics," which is the investigation of the relation of a language to its speaker (Morris, 1938, p. 6). One of the major meanings of a linguistic sign is what its user means, or intends, in using it. The intention that a speaker has in using a given sign might be standard or not. Even if it is standard, it need not be the only standard intention associated with that sign; moreover, it need not be associated with that sign only. If, therefore, ME is to teach students to be intolerant of the language of cultural disrespect, it must overcome the obstacle of the ambiguity of the intentions of the speakers of the language. It is not enough for ME teachers to instruct their students to be intolerant of linguistic signs commonly associated with intentions of cultural disrespect. It also has to teach students how to determine what the user of a linguistic sign actually intends in using it. It is one thing to be intolerant of ethnic jokes whose users intend to be culturally disrespective in telling them; it is quite another to be intolerant of such jokes when their users do not mean to be culturally disrespective. If, therefore, ME fails to teach students how to discriminate bad from innocent intentions on the part of the users of the language of cultural disrespect, it will suffer charges of discounting the difference between bad and innocent intentions. It also might be liable to charges of encouraging students to confuse innocent people with bad ones.

That ME can effectively teach students to read intentions in

this regard is not readily evident. Actual language contexts differ from one to the other, and what a person's intention is in one context might be quite different in another. Accordingly, teaching students to discern intentions by following formulas seems out of the question. On-the-job training is also beside the point. Indeed, the notorious problem of teaching law students to demonstrate intent effectively in the courtroom indicates that ME teachers will have even greater difficulty in instructing their students to interpret intentions in many other areas of the world.

The second difficulty involved in ME's teaching students to be intolerant of the language of cultural disrespect pertains to the recipients of the language. Even if the teller of sexist jokes does not intend to be disrespecful of women,[3] he still might offend a listener. In other words, the use of a linguistic sign of cultural disrespect might offend members of the involved cultural group regardless of the innocent intention of the user of the sign. Advocates of ME, therefore, might insist (some actually do) that students should be taught to be intolerant of the language of cultural disrespect even though they cannot be effectively taught to discern the intentions lying behind the language. Despite the immediate appeal of this argument, however, it ignores a key point, which is that the language of cultural disrespect can be tolerated in the sense of endured. To be sure, the members of different cultural groups might have different levels of endurance; also, the

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[3]As the guys say down at the fire hall, "No offense intended, lady, okay?"

members of the same cultural group might have various individual levels of endurance. But on the assumption that a level of tolerance as endurance is something that a person learns rather than inherits, I suppose that the members of different cultural groups can learn to tolerate languages of cultural disrespect at a much higher level than they have today. At least, noblemen and gentlemen gave up dueling when they learned to endure insults to their individual honors. I suppose too, of course, that people can learn to endure languages of cultural disrespect at a much lower level than they have today. Even so, there is a very good reason for ME as to why they should acquire thicker skins: Enhanced sensitivity to cultural disrespect might antagonize a situation that is already agitated and, thus, lead to disharmony among cultural groups. But along with teaching students to endure the language of cultural disrespect, I wish to emphasize, ME may further strengthen the chances of social harmony by teaching students to show only cultural respect towards one another.

The third difficulty in the policy of ME's teaching intolerance of the language of cultural disrespect bears initially on a possible self-contradiction in that policy. Traditionally, Christians and Muslims have spoken ill of one another; so have Protestants and Roman Catholics, French and Germans, Poles and Hungarians, Greeks and Turks, Japanese and Koreans, Muslims and Hindus, Hutus and Tutsis, to name only a very few instances. In a multicultural society, therefore, it is quite likely that some cultural group will have some language of cultural disrespect as

one of its features. Hence, to teach students in that society to be intolerant of the language of cultural disrespect is likely to teach them to be intolerant and thus disrespectful of some feature of some cultural group in that society. It appears, therefore, that teaching intolerance of the language of cultural disrespect might be self-defeating in that it might promote cultural disrespect.

Defenders of the intolerance position will promptly raise an objection. Not tolerating a language of cultural disrespect that is a trait of some cultural group is itself not an expression of cultural disrespect. Such intolerance is simply a necessary socially therapeutic act. A multicultural society cannot exist in harmony if any of its constituent cultural groups are inclined to speak ill of each other. Thus, for the sake of the health of the social whole, a multicultural society must take measures to encourage offending groups to suppress, if not eliminate, their lanugages of cultural disrespect. In response, however, one is compelled to insist that these measures, even if they were for the good of the social whole, would entail cultural disrespect. For in maintaining that the targeted languages be suppressed or eliminated, these measures in effect regard certain characteristics of certain cultural groups as unworthy of the given society and thus disrespects those cultural characteristics.

It might be further objected, however, that I have completely misunderstood the cultural respect that belongs to a multicultural society. Just as multicultural society does not demand that its

members tolerate every cultural group, it does not insist that its member must respect each and every cultural feature of each and every cultural group. It would be irrational of such a society to maintain that its members should respect a culture of racial supremacy or any other that is hostile to the very idea of multicultural society. Thus, far from wanting to teach students to respect all cultures without qualification, ME aims to teach them to respect any culture only to the extent that it is fit for a multicultural society.

While I find this explanation eminently sensible, I think that it contains problems of its own. For one thing, the explanation allows for a parochialism of cultural respect. We shall respect all the cultures that are able to dwell in our multicultural society, and they shall respect all those able to dwell in their multicultural society. We, then, will be disrespectful of them and their society; they will be disrespectful of us and our society. This does not sound a whole lot different from what human history has long experienced. Consider the mixing of Angles, Saxons, and Normans that gave us the English, who in turn detested the French, who arose from another cultural combination. It has to be pointed out, however, that cultural parochialism is not inevitable for ME. If people recognized that the world nowadays is too small and intertwined for them to live in separate cultural groups, they would understand that they have to resign themselves to living with one another and thus that they have to give up their cultural features that run counter to intercultural harmony. This might

mean, of course, that some groups might have to lose much of their given cultural identities, but it also means that a world culture might appear that is structured something like a mosaic, whose tesserae are remnants of cultures past.

Even though I do not believe that the loss of some of today's cultural traits would necessarily be a bad thing, I must note that a multicultural society is not the only alternative to a society with cultural conflict. Other alternatives are cultural imperialism, individualism, and social liberalism. People might see no good reason to resign themselves to any of these, but they might not know why they should resign themselves to multiculturalism either. What, then, is a good reason for overcoming cultural conflict by entering a multicultural society at the cost of losing some of one's cultural identity? The usual answer to this question is that one will gain cultural enrichment (Banks, 1981). The English can gain by eating French cuisine, and the French can gain by listening to German or Italian music. But whether or not this answer holds depends upon the standards by which one judges what is to be gained. These standards cannot be those of some culture; if they were, they would constitute a cultural hegemony. If, however, they are totally independent of any culture, what is their source? Indeed, what are they? By what standard can we say that the worst of French cooking is better than any of the best of English fare? By what test can we say that mediocre German or Italian music is better than all but the very best of French music? As far as I can determine, the answers given

to these questions by the advocates of Multicultural Education have been superficially and unsystematically argued.

I conclude with a recommendation. Tolerance may be ascribed only to moral beings, that is, voluntary agents engaged in interpersonal action. It would not make sense to blame or praise people for being tolerant or intolerant if they were not acting willfully. Nor would it make sense to refer to a hermit or some other solitary figure as tolerant or intolerant. So, if the proponents of ME reflected on the conceptual connection between tolerance and moral agency, they ultimately would see that students must learn to tolerate all cultural features compatible with moral agency and learn not to tolerate any that are incompatible with moral agency. They also would see that students must learn to respect those cultural traits that are compatible with moral agency and hold in contempt those that are incompatible.[4] This recommendation, I believe, would enable ME to avoid the difficulties discussed above.

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[4]In my book, Moral Education for Americans, scheduled to be published by Praeger, I devote the second chapter to an analysis of the concept of a moral standard. In the course of that analysis I explain what a moral agent is in a descriptive sense and specify certain norms logically entailed by the idea of a moral agent.

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